

Chapter 4

Lost

THE robbery at the Bank had not languished before, and did not cease to occupy a front place in the attention of the principal of that establishment now. In boastful proof of his promptitude and activity, as a remarkable man, and a self-made man, and a commercial wonder more admirable than Venus, who had risen out of the mud instead of the sea, he liked to show how little his domestic affairs abated his business ardour. Consequently, in the first few weeks of his resumed bachelorhood, he even advanced upon his usual display of bustle, and every day made such a rout in renewing his investigations into the robbery, that the officers who had it in hand almost wished it had never been committed.

They were at fault too, and off the scent. Although they had been so quiet since the first outbreak of the matter, that most people really did suppose it to have been abandoned as hopeless, nothing new occurred. No implicated man or woman took untimely courage, or made a self-betraying step. More remarkable yet, Stephen Blackpool could not be heard of, and the mysterious old woman remained a mystery.

Things having come to this pass, and showing no latent signs of stirring beyond it, the upshot of Mr. Bounderby's investigations was, that he resolved to hazard a bold burst. He drew up a placard, offering Twenty Pounds reward for the apprehension of Stephen Blackpool, suspected of complicity in the robbery of Coketown Bank on such a night; he described the said Stephen Blackpool by dress, complexion, estimated height, and manner, as minutely as he could; he recited how he had left the town, and in what direction he had been last seen going; he had the whole printed in great black letters on a staring broadsheet; and he caused the walls to be posted with it in the dead of night, so that it should strike upon the sight of the whole population at one blow.

The factory-bells had need to ring their loudest that morning to disperse the groups of workers who stood in the tardy daybreak, collected round the placards, devouring them with eager eyes. Not the least eager of the eyes assembled, were the eyes of those who could not read. These people, as they listened to the friendly voice that read aloud - there was always some such ready to help them - stared at the characters which meant so much with a vague awe and respect that would have been half ludicrous, if any aspect of public ignorance could ever be otherwise than threatening and full of evil. Many ears and eyes were busy with a vision of the matter of these placards, among turning spindles, rattling looms, and whirling wheels, for

hours afterwards; and when the Hands cleared out again into the streets, there were still as many readers as before.

Slackbridge, the delegate, had to address his audience too that night; and Slackbridge had obtained a clean bill from the printer, and had brought it in his pocket. Oh, my friends and fellow- countrymen, the down-trodden operatives of Coketown, oh, my fellow- brothers and fellow-workmen and fellow-citizens and fellowmen, what a to-do was there, when Slackbridge unfolded what he called 'that damning document,' and held it up to the gaze, and for the execration of the working-man community! 'Oh, my fellow-men, behold of what a traitor in the camp of those great spirits who are enrolled upon the holy scroll of Justice and of Union, is appropriately capable! Oh, my prostrate friends, with the galling yoke of tyrants on your necks and the iron foot of despotism treading down your fallen forms into the dust of the earth, upon which right glad would your oppressors be to see you creeping on your bellies all the days of your lives, like the serpent in the garden - oh, my brothers, and shall I as a man not add, my sisters too, what do you say, now, of Stephen Blackpool, with a slight stoop in his shoulders and about five foot seven in height, as set forth in this degrading and disgusting document, this blighting bill, this pernicious placard, this abominable advertisement; and with what majesty of denouncement will you crush the viper, who would bring this stain and shame upon the God-like race that happily has cast him out for ever! Yes, my compatriots, happily cast him out and sent him forth! For you remember how he stood here before you on this platform; you remember how, face to face and foot to foot, I pursued him through all his intricate windings; you remember how he sneaked and slunk, and sidled, and splitted of straws, until, with not an inch of ground to which to cling, I hurled him out from amongst us: an object for the undying finger of scorn to point at, and for the avenging fire of every free and thinking mind to scorch and scar! And now, my friends - my labouring friends, for I rejoice and triumph in that stigma - my friends whose hard but honest beds are made in toil, and whose scanty but independent pots are boiled in hardship; and now, I say, my friends, what appellation has that dastard craven taken to himself, when, with the mask torn from his features, he stands before us in all his native deformity, a What? A thief! A plunderer! A proscribed fugitive, with a price upon his head; a fester and a wound upon the noble character of the Coketown operative! Therefore, my band of brothers in a sacred bond, to which your children and your children's children yet unborn have set their infant hands and seals, I propose to you on the part of the United Aggregate Tribunal, ever watchful for your welfare, ever zealous for your benefit, that this meeting does Resolve: That Stephen Blackpool, weaver, referred to in this placard, having been already solemnly disowned by the community of Coketown Hands, the same are free from the shame

of his misdeeds, and cannot as a class be reproached with his dishonest actions!

Thus Slackbridge; gnashing and perspiring after a prodigious sort. A few stern voices called out 'No!' and a score or two hailed, with assenting cries of 'Hear, hear!' the caution from one man, 'Slackbridge, y'or over hetter in't; y'or a goen too fast!' But these were pigmies against an army; the general assemblage subscribed to the gospel according to Slackbridge, and gave three cheers for him, as he sat demonstratively panting at them.

These men and women were yet in the streets, passing quietly to their homes, when Sissy, who had been called away from Louisa some minutes before, returned.

'Who is it?' asked Louisa.

'It is Mr. Bounderby,' said Sissy, timid of the name, 'and your brother Mr. Tom, and a young woman who says her name is Rachael, and that you know her.'

'What do they want, Sissy dear?'

'They want to see you. Rachael has been crying, and seems angry.'

'Father,' said Louisa, for he was present, 'I cannot refuse to see them, for a reason that will explain itself. Shall they come in here?'

As he answered in the affirmative, Sissy went away to bring them. She reappeared with them directly. Tom was last; and remained standing in the obscurest part of the room, near the door.

'Mrs. Bounderby,' said her husband, entering with a cool nod, 'I don't disturb you, I hope. This is an unseasonable hour, but here is a young woman who has been making statements which render my visit necessary. Tom Gradgrind, as your son, young Tom, refuses for some obstinate reason or other to say anything at all about those statements, good or bad, I am obliged to confront her with your daughter.'

'You have seen me once before, young lady,' said Rachael, standing in front of Louisa.

Tom coughed.

'You have seen me, young lady,' repeated Rachael, as she did not answer, 'once before.'

Tom coughed again.

'I have.'

Rachael cast her eyes proudly towards Mr. Bounderby, and said, 'Will you make it known, young lady, where, and who was there?'

'I went to the house where Stephen Blackpool lodged, on the night of his discharge from his work, and I saw you there. He was there too; and an old woman who did not speak, and whom I could scarcely see, stood in a dark corner. My brother was with me.'

'Why couldn't you say so, young Tom?' demanded Bounderby.

'I promised my sister I wouldn't.' Which Louisa hastily confirmed. 'And besides,' said the whelp bitterly, 'she tells her own story so precious well - and so full - that what business had I to take it out of her mouth!'

'Say, young lady, if you please,' pursued Rachael, 'why, in an evil hour, you ever came to Stephen's that night.'

'I felt compassion for him,' said Louisa, her colour deepening, 'and I wished to know what he was going to do, and wished to offer him assistance.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' said Bounderby. 'Much flattered and obliged.'

'Did you offer him,' asked Rachael, 'a bank-note?'

'Yes; but he refused it, and would only take two pounds in gold.'

Rachael cast her eyes towards Mr. Bounderby again.

'Oh, certainly!' said Bounderby. 'If you put the question whether your ridiculous and improbable account was true or not, I am bound to say it's confirmed.'

'Young lady,' said Rachael, 'Stephen Blackpool is now named as a thief in public print all over this town, and where else! There have been a meeting to-night where he have been spoken of in the same shameful way. Stephen! The honestest lad, the truest lad, the best! Her indignation failed her, and she broke off sobbing.

'I am very, very sorry,' said Louisa.

'Oh, young lady, young lady,' returned Rachael, 'I hope you may be, but I don't know! I can't say what you may ha' done! The like of you

don't know us, don't care for us, don't belong to us. I am not sure why you may ha' come that night. I can't tell but what you may ha' come wi' some aim of your own, not mindin to what trouble you brought such as the poor lad. I said then, Bless you for coming; and I said it of my heart, you seemed to take so pitifully to him; but I don't know now, I don't know!

Louisa could not reproach her for her unjust suspicions; she was so faithful to her idea of the man, and so afflicted.

'And when I think,' said Rachael through her sobs, 'that the poor lad was so grateful, thinkin you so good to him - when I mind that he put his hand over his hard-worken face to hide the tears that you brought up there - Oh, I hope you may be sorry, and ha' no bad cause to be it; but I don't know, I don't know!'

'You're a pretty article,' growled the whelp, moving uneasily in his dark corner, 'to come here with these precious imputations! You ought to be bundled out for not knowing how to behave yourself, and you would be by rights.'

She said nothing in reply; and her low weeping was the only sound that was heard, until Mr. Bounderby spoke.

'Come!' said he, 'you know what you have engaged to do. You had better give your mind to that; not this.'

'Deed, I am loath,' returned Rachael, drying her eyes, 'that any here should see me like this; but I won't be seen so again. Young lady, when I had read what's put in print of Stephen - and what has just as much truth in it as if it had been put in print of you - I went straight to the Bank to say I knew where Stephen was, and to give a sure and certain promise that he should be here in two days. I couldn't meet wi' Mr. Bounderby then, and your brother sent me away, and I tried to find you, but you was not to be found, and I went back to work. Soon as I come out of the Mill to-night, I hastened to hear what was said of Stephen - for I know wi' pride he will come back to shame it! - and then I went again to seek Mr. Bounderby, and I found him, and I told him every word I knew; and he believed no word I said, and brought me here.'

'So far, that's true enough,' assented Mr. Bounderby, with his hands in his pockets and his hat on. 'But I have known you people before to-day, you'll observe, and I know you never die for want of talking. Now, I recommend you not so much to mind talking just now, as doing. You have undertaken to do something; all I remark upon that at present is, do it!'

'I have written to Stephen by the post that went out this afternoon, as I have written to him once before sin' he went away,' said Rachael; 'and he will be here, at furthest, in two days.'

'Then, I'll tell you something. You are not aware perhaps,' retorted Mr. Bounderby, 'that you yourself have been looked after now and then, not being considered quite free from suspicion in this business, on account of most people being judged according to the company they keep. The post-office hasn't been forgotten either. What I'll tell you is, that no letter to Stephen Blackpool has ever got into it. Therefore, what has become of yours, I leave you to guess. Perhaps you're mistaken, and never wrote any.'

'He hadn't been gone from here, young lady,' said Rachael, turning appealingly to Louisa, 'as much as a week, when he sent me the only letter I have had from him, saying that he was forced to seek work in another name.'

'Oh, by George!' cried Bounderby, shaking his head, with a whistle, 'he changes his name, does he! That's rather unlucky, too, for such an immaculate chap. It's considered a little suspicious in Courts of Justice, I believe, when an Innocent happens to have many names.'

'What,' said Rachael, with the tears in her eyes again, 'what, young lady, in the name of Mercy, was left the poor lad to do! The masters against him on one hand, the men against him on the other, he only wantin to work hard in peace, and do what he felt right. Can a man have no soul of his own, no mind of his own? Must he go wrong all through wi' this side, or must he go wrong all through wi' that, or else be hunted like a hare?'

'Indeed, indeed, I pity him from my heart,' returned Louisa; 'and I hope that he will clear himself.'

'You need have no fear of that, young lady. He is sure!'

'All the surer, I suppose,' said Mr. Bounderby, 'for your refusing to tell where he is? Eh?'

'He shall not, through any act of mine, come back wi' the unmerited reproach of being brought back. He shall come back of his own accord to clear himself, and put all those that have injured his good character, and he not here for its defence, to shame. I have told him what has been done against him,' said Rachael, throwing off all distrust as a rock throws of the sea, 'and he will be here, at furthest, in two days.'

'Notwithstanding which,' added Mr. Bounderby, 'if he can be laid hold of any sooner, he shall have an earlier opportunity of clearing himself. As to you, I have nothing against you; what you came and told me turns out to be true, and I have given you the means of proving it to be true, and there's an end of it. I wish you good night all! I must be off to look a little further into this.'

Tom came out of his corner when Mr. Bounderby moved, moved with him, kept close to him, and went away with him. The only parting salutation of which he delivered himself was a sulky 'Good night, father!' With a brief speech, and a scowl at his sister, he left the house.

Since his sheet-anchor had come home, Mr. Gradgrind had been sparing of speech. He still sat silent, when Louisa mildly said:

'Rachael, you will not distrust me one day, when you know me better.'

'It goes against me,' Rachael answered, in a gentler manner, 'to mistrust any one; but when I am so mistrusted - when we all are - I cannot keep such things quite out of my mind. I ask your pardon for having done you an injury. I don't think what I said now. Yet I might come to think it again, wi' the poor lad so wronged.'

'Did you tell him in your letter,' inquired Sissy, 'that suspicion seemed to have fallen upon him, because he had been seen about the Bank at night? He would then know what he would have to explain on coming back, and would be ready.'

'Yes, dear,' she returned; 'but I can't guess what can have ever taken him there. He never used to go there. It was never in his way. His way was the same as mine, and not near it.'

Sissy had already been at her side asking her where she lived, and whether she might come to-morrow night, to inquire if there were news of him.

'I doubt,' said Rachael, 'if he can be here till next day.'

'Then I will come next night too,' said Sissy.

When Rachael, assenting to this, was gone, Mr. Gradgrind lifted up his head, and said to his daughter:

'Louisa, my dear, I have never, that I know of, seen this man. Do you believe him to be implicated?'

'I think I have believed it, father, though with great difficulty. I do not believe it now.'

'That is to say, you once persuaded yourself to believe it, from knowing him to be suspected. His appearance and manner; are they so honest?'

'Very honest.'

'And her confidence not to be shaken! I ask myself,' said Mr. Gradgrind, musing, 'does the real culprit know of these accusations? Where is he? Who is he?'

His hair had latterly begun to change its colour. As he leaned upon his hand again, looking gray and old, Louisa, with a face of fear and pity, hurriedly went over to him, and sat close at his side. Her eyes by accident met Sissy's at the moment. Sissy flushed and started, and Louisa put her finger on her lip.

Next night, when Sissy returned home and told Louisa that Stephen was not come, she told it in a whisper. Next night again, when she came home with the same account, and added that he had not been heard of, she spoke in the same low frightened tone. From the moment of that interchange of looks, they never uttered his name, or any reference to him, aloud; nor ever pursued the subject of the robbery, when Mr. Gradgrind spoke of it.

The two appointed days ran out, three days and nights ran out, and Stephen Blackpool was not come, and remained unheard of. On the fourth day, Rachael, with unabated confidence, but considering her despatch to have miscarried, went up to the Bank, and showed her letter from him with his address, at a working colony, one of many, not upon the main road, sixty miles away. Messengers were sent to that place, and the whole town looked for Stephen to be brought in next day.

During this whole time the whelp moved about with Mr. Bounderby like his shadow, assisting in all the proceedings. He was greatly excited, horribly fevered, bit his nails down to the quick, spoke in a hard rattling voice, and with lips that were black and burnt up. At the hour when the suspected man was looked for, the whelp was at the station; offering to wager that he had made off before the arrival of those who were sent in quest of him, and that he would not appear.

The whelp was right. The messengers returned alone. Rachael's letter had gone, Rachael's letter had been delivered. Stephen Blackpool had decamped in that same hour; and no soul knew more of him. The only doubt in Coketown was, whether Rachael had written in good faith,

believing that he really would come back, or warning him to fly. On this point opinion was divided.

Six days, seven days, far on into another week. The wretched whelp plucked up a ghastly courage, and began to grow defiant. 'Was the suspected fellow the thief? A pretty question! If not, where was the man, and why did he not come back?'

Where was the man, and why did he not come back? In the dead of night the echoes of his own words, which had rolled Heaven knows how far away in the daytime, came back instead, and abided by him until morning.